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Announcing our 2022 National High School Essay Contest

What do high school students think about “one of the greatest pieces of fraud” that Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger ever saw in his lifetime?

A Message from the President of Americans Against Gun Violence

I'm posting this message to inform our supporters that our 2022 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest is now open and to ask for your assistance in bringing the contest to the attention of any high school students and educators with whom you may have contact.

I have mixed emotions every year when I post the essay contest announcement. I'm very pleased, on the one hand, that we've been able to host the contest every year since 2018 as a means of fostering and rewarding critical thinking among high school students concerning the measures needed to stop our country's epidemic of gun violence – an epidemic that unlike Covid-19, disproportionately harms our children and our youth. I'm also grateful that due to the generosity of our supporters, we'll be awarding at least \$15,000 to the contest winners again this year, bringing the total awards that we've given students over the five year history of the contest to over \$75,000.

I'm deeply troubled, on the other hand, by the fact that there's a continued need to engage in discussions with high school students about our epidemic of gun violence. This is an epidemic that we members of older generations should have stopped long ago. And I'm particularly troubled that this year, the prompt for our essay contest concerns a fraud that **was** debunked long ago, but that was given new life by the U.S. Supreme Court as recently as 2008. This fraud now comprises one of the main obstacles to the adoption of stringent gun control laws in the United State comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in all the other high income democratic countries of the world – countries in which mass shootings, including shootings on school campuses, occur rarely, if ever, and in which the average rate of gun related murders of high school age youth is 82 times lower (that's 82 **times** lower, not 82 **per cent** lower) than in our country.¹ This fraud is the claim that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns – a fraud long promoted by the U.S. gun lobby² but codified into the U.S. Constitution for the first time in history in the Supreme Court's 2008 *Heller* decision.³

In *Heller*, a narrow 5-4 majority of Supreme Court justices reversed over two centuries of legal precedent, including four prior Supreme Court opinions,⁴ in ruling that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to own a gun unrelated to service in a “well regulated militia.” In his autobiography, *The Making of a Justice*, the late Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, who wrote a dissenting opinion in *Heller*, described the decision as “unquestionably the most clearly incorrect decision that the Court announced

during my [35 year] tenure on the bench.”⁵ Stevens noted that prior to the *Heller* decision, the inextricable relationship between the “right of the people to and bear arms” in the second half of the Second Amendment and the need for a “well regulated militia” described in the first half of the Amendment had been “so well settled”⁶ that the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger had stated, with regard to the gun lobby’s misrepresentation of the Second Amendment – a misrepresentation endorsed by the *Heller* majority:

“If I were writing the Bill of Rights now, there wouldn't be any such thing as the Second Amendment.... This has been the subject of one of the greatest pieces of fraud – I repeat the word ‘fraud’ – on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”⁷

This statement by Chief Justice Burger is the prompt for our 2022 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest.

I’ve written quite a bit in recent Americans Against Gun Violence president’s messages and press releases about the egregious flaws in the *Heller* decision, about our efforts to get *Heller* overturned, and about the fact that Americans Against Gun Violence is the only gun violence prevention organization in the entire country that openly advocates and is actively pursuing overturning *Heller*.⁸ There’s also quite a bit of information about the Second Amendment and the *Heller* decision posted on the [Facts and FAQ’s page](#) of the Americans Against Gun Violence website. I won’t go into further detail on this subject in this message.

I would greatly appreciate it, though, if you would help bring our 2022 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Contest to the attention of any high school students and high school educators with whom you have contact. An essay contest flyer is attached, and full details concerning the contest are posted on the High School Essay Contest page of the Americans Against Gun Violence website. I would also appreciate it if you would bring Chief Justice Burger’s statement concerning the fraudulent misrepresentation of the Second Amendment to the attention of friends, family members, colleagues, and especially, elected officials with whom you have contact whenever the subject of gun control and the Second Amendment comes up. In helping publicize our 2022 essay contest and in openly discussing the fraudulent misrepresentation of the Second Amendment, you will actually be helping to overturn the *Heller* decision and end our country’s shameful epidemic of gun violence. How so?

On August 21, 1858, in the first of his seven famous debates with Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln said:

“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”⁹

By helping bring our 2022 Americans Against Gun Violence National High School Essay Contest to the attention of high school students and educators, and by openly discussing with your other contacts the fraudulent misrepresentation of the Second Amendment by the gun lobby, by the *Heller* majority, by most elected officials, and even by other gun violence prevention organizations, you’ll be helping to mold public sentiment; and in

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accordance with Lincoln's "Public sentiment is everything" thesis, you'll be helping to hasten the arrival of the day when the Heller decision is overturned and when we adopt stringent gun control laws in the United States comparable to the laws that have long been in effect in other high income democratic countries of the world – laws including a complete ban on civilian ownership of all automatic and semi-automatic long guns (including so-called "assault rifles") comparable to the bans adopted by Britain following the Hungerford mass shooting in 1987¹⁰ and by Australia following the Port Arthur mass shooting in 1996;¹¹ and a complete ban on civilian ownership of all handguns comparable to the ban that Britain adopted after the 1996 Dunblane Primary School mass shooting.¹²

There are a couple of other ways in which you can help contribute to the success and the impact of our annual National High School Essay Contest. One of these ways is by being an essay reader and helping choose the winners in our 2022 contest. The poignant winning essays from past years' contests are posted on the High School Essay Contest page of the Americans Against Gun Violence website, and I've appended links to these essays below. Reading some of essays that are not chosen as contest winners, though, helps give a broader perspective on the effect of the epidemic of gun violence on our high school age youth, the degree to which some students are misinformed on the causes and remedies for this epidemic, and the degree to which some of them have been conditioned to believe that high rates of gun violence are an inevitable component of a democratic society. Please reply to this email if you'd be willing to help choose the winners in our 2022 contest by being an essay reader. We'll be starting the process of reading and rating essays shortly after the April 16 deadline for students to enter our 2022 contest.

The other way that you can contribute to the impact and success of our annual National High School Essay Contest is by [making a tax deductible contribution to the essay contest fund](#). As I noted above, due to the generosity of supporters like you, with this year's awards, we will have given over \$75,000 to contest winners over the five year history of the contest. It's a fact of life that the more awards we give out, the more interest the contest generates. I also know that most of us make contributions to charitable organizations near the end of the tax year, not at the beginning. If you're in a position to make another contribution at this time, though, we'd greatly appreciate it if you would make a donation to the Americans Against Gun Violence essay contest to help ensure that we're able to offer the contest again next year with at least \$15,000 in awards. The essay contest is run entirely with voluntary labor, and 100% of contributions to the essay contest fund go directly to student awards.

Thanks for your support of Americans Against Gun Violence and our annual National High School Essay Contest. And thanks for helping us overcome the obstacles to stopping our country's shameful epidemic of gun violence, including the obstacle that the late Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger called "one of the greatest pieces of fraud" that he had ever seen in his lifetime - the false claim that the Second Amendment was intended to confer an individual right to own guns unrelated to service in a "well regulated militia."

Sincerely,



Bill Durston, MD
President, Americans Against Gun Violence

Essay Contest Prompts Used in Past Years

(Click on the year to read the winning essays.)

[2018](#): "The time has now come that we must adopt stringent gun control legislation comparable to the legislation in force in virtually every civilized country in the world." - The Late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, June of 1968

[2019](#): "The Second Amendment guarantees no right to keep and bear a firearm that does not have 'some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia.'" - Excerpt from the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun's majority opinion in the 1980 case of *Lewis v. United States*

[2020](#): "Firearm regulations, to include bans of handguns and assault weapons, are the most effective way to reduce firearm related injuries." – Position Statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics, issued in April of 2000.

[2021](#): "Describe the effect on American youth of the confluence of our country's longstanding gun violence epidemic with the current Covid-19 pandemic and the threat of violent insurrection; and describe what role you believe the adoption of stringent gun control laws should play at this critical time in our nation's history."

¹ Ashish P. Thakrar et al., "Child Mortality In The US And 19 OECD Comparator Nations: A 50-Year Time-Trend Analysis," *Health Affairs* 37, no. 1 (January 2018): 140–49, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0767>.

² Michael Waldman, "How the NRA Rewrote the Second Amendment," *POLITICO Magazine*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/nra-guns-second-amendment-106856.html>.

³ *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 US (Supreme Court 2008).

⁴ *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 US 542 (Supreme Court 1876); *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 US (Supreme Court 1886); *U.S. v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939) (n.d.); *Lewis v. United States*, No. 55 (U.S. 1980).

⁵ John Paul Stevens, *The Making of a Justice: Reflections on My First 94 Years* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019), 482.

⁶ Stevens, 483.

⁷ Warren Burger, *PBS News Hour*, December 16, 1991, c.

⁸ See, for example, "Are you unknowingly contributing to the other big lie?" <https://aagunv.org/are-you-unknowingly-contributing-to-the-other-big-lie/>, December 5, 2021; "Americans Against Gun Violence calls on High Court to overturn rogue 2nd Amendment decision," <https://aagunv.org/americans-against-gun-violence-calls-on-high-court-to-overturn-rogue-2nd-amendment-decision/>, September 22, 2021; "Americans Against Gun Violence Denounces District Court Judge Roger Benitez's Ruling in *Miller v. Bonta* that California's Assault Weapons Ban Violates Second Amendment," <https://aagunv.org/americans-against-gun-violence-denounces-district-court-judge-roger-benitez-s-ruling-in-miller-v-bonta-that-californias-assault-weapons-ban->

[violates-second-amendment/](#), June 9, 2021. Use the search icon on the Americans Against Gun Violence website to find other posts concerning the Second Amendment and the *Heller* decision.

⁹ David Zarefsky, “‘Public Sentiment Is Everything’: Lincoln’s View of Political Persuasion,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1994), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0015.204>.

¹⁰ Michael J. North, “Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 185–93.

¹¹ Rebecca Peters, “Rational Firearm Regulation: Evidence-Based Gun Laws in Australia,” in *Reducing Gun Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 195–204; Joel Negin et al., “Australian Firearm Regulation at 25—Successes, Ongoing Challenges, and Lessons for the World,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 384, no. 17 (2021): 1581–83.

¹² North, “Gun Control in Great Britain after the Dunblane Shootings.”